

Coming of age in cohousing

Growing up communally brings exposure to the world of adults—and lessons in interdependence

By [Courtney E. Martin](#) Feb. 13, 2019

At the last minute, Kathryn McCamant had to take her 4-year-old daughter Jessie along with her to a meeting. The story of her life, it seemed. McCamant was one of the architects hell-bent on spreading the word about cohousing to America. A Danish invention in which families live in separate homes but share communal space and meals, it wasn't an easy sell. There were so. Many. Meetings.

At this particular one, Jessie sat at her mom's feet under the table and drew in her sketchbook as the adults babbled on and on about "the hard knocks of real estate development," as McCamant put it. As the end of the meeting drew near, she looked down and burst out laughing. "She had written WOW on my shoes," McCamant remembers. "It took me a while to realize it was 'MOM' from her perspective. Great juxtaposition! While they were my dress leather shoes, luckily, they were purchased second-hand. Our kids teach us so much!"

When Jessie Durrett was just starting to toddle, architects McCamant and Charles Durrett were putting the finishing touches on the first distinct cohousing community in America: Muir Commons, in Davis, California. McCamant and Durrett became interested in cohousing while studying in Copenhagen in the '80s and played a key role in spreading it across America over the next couple of decades. Katie, as she's known, and Charles lived in two different cohousing communities while they were raising Jessie, one in Emeryville, California, and another in Nevada City, California.

The [archetypical cohousing community](#) is made up of a couple dozen private households that are built to face one another around a central courtyard. They share common spaces, like a kitchen and eating area, a garden, tool shed, and laundry facilities, as well as a belief in the value of intergenerational interdependence. In practical terms, this usually means shared meals and communal workdays on the land. In spiritual terms, it means "you've got my back, I've got yours." Today, there are more than 160 cohousing communities in 25 states across the country, according to the Cohousing Association of America.

When I asked Durrett, now 27 and studying public policy and international relations at Princeton, whether she ever rebelled against the family business, as it were, she shook her head and answered: "Look, they did all the hard work. They brought cohousing across an ocean, *and* got so many people to care about it, *and* convinced planning commissions that didn't get it that it was a good idea, *and* actually found the financing, *and* built these communities. I just got to soak up all the benefits!"

Durrett is part of the first generation—potentially 1,000 strong—to spend its formative childhood years in cohousing communities. Twenty-five years into this grand experiment,

what are the benefits to the kids who grew up in and among them? An informal survey and a handful of in-depth interviews reveal that coming of age in a cohousing community has wide-ranging and long-term impacts.

In [bell hook's essay on "revolutionary parenting,"](#) she offers a feminist vision of child caring as both sacred and communal—not something to be rejected by women, but something to be shared by women *and* men. “This kind of shared responsibility for child care can happen in small community settings where people know and trust one another,” she explains. “It cannot happen in those settings if parents regard their children as ‘property,’ their ‘possession.’”

In other words, if parents see their children as a direct reflection of their own values, skills, and accomplishments, then other adults may seem like a potential threat to that individual project. If, instead, parents have a communal worldview, acknowledging the limitations of their own skills, time, and energy, other adults are a gift. Bell hooks details how black communities have organically embraced revolutionary parenting—looking out for one another's kids without any money exchanged; cohousing communities, while overwhelmingly white, share this cultural norm.

In cohousing communities, revolutionary parenting can be subtle to the point of invisibility—slipping into a seat at the kitchen table of a neighbor's house for dinner at the last minute when a parent gets stuck at work, talking about getting your period for the first time with an aunt-like figure, or stumbling on a neighbor fixing a fence and hanging out alongside her to learn how to use a saw.

Sometimes it's more obvious, and even has economic consequences. When Durrett was applying to college, she remembers that in addition to asking her parents to read and give feedback on her essays, she also asked a dozen other adults in the community. It's a service that is often outsourced to expensive paid consultants among the nation's elite families (sometimes [to the tune of](#) \$16,000).

Likewise, many cohousing kids talked about learning to play sports that their parents didn't know anything about from various members of the community, learning to cook dishes that their own parents didn't cook, and even getting spiritual and emotional counsel from people other than their parents when going through a challenging time. One young person I spoke to, who preferred to remain anonymous, talked about relying on the support of a neighbor when her own mother battled depression. “It was a lot easier to bear the weight of that moment because I had other adults around me,” she explained. “They not only helped with the logistical stuff that my mom couldn't handle, but normalized the idea that I wasn't a freak because my mom was sick. They reminded me that a lot of people deal with mental health issues.”

When Rachel Garlick was 12 years old and living in Oakland, California's [Temescal Commons](#) (where I now live), she was homeschooled for a brief period. Her parents—a nurse and a children's minister—couldn't meet all of her academic needs. Rather than hire someone to tutor her, as would be the likely course of action if one were depending

on a nuclear family, “Uncle Tom,” a neighbor who worked as a literacy specialist in the Berkeley Public School system, stepped in to give her books to read and discuss the plots with her. That was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with reading for Rachel, and now she wants to be an educator, just like Uncle Tom.

Many cohousing kids talked about the power of being exposed to a wide range of professions through the adults in their communities. So many of us leave high school woefully unaware of the range of directions we might go, in large part because we have limited exposure to the world of adults. When Ravenna Koenig, who grew up in [Vashon Cohousing](#) in Washington, was a senior in college, she felt at a loss about how to pursue adult life. She had a hunch she wanted to be a radio reporter, but the rest seemed fuzzy. How does one get there? Where does one live? *How* does one live?

She decided to interview the adults of Vashon Cohousing over spring break. “I asked questions about careers, relationships, faith, purpose, doubt,” she remembers. “One person I interviewed was the editor of our local paper, another was a teacher, another a farmer-turned-videographer, another a builder, another a stay-at-home mother. But they’d done all kinds of jobs, and had had all kinds of varied experiences that shaped them. ... Each conversation unspooled in a very different direction.”

Like Durrett, most cohousing kids have been coloring under a table or building Legos in proximity to more meetings than they could possibly count. While many remember the tedium most acutely, they also testify to getting an overall impression that creating structures and systems that work for a wide range of people is complex and rewarding work. Renay Friendshuh, who grew up in a cohousing community called [Sandhill Farm](#) in rural Missouri and now attends Carleton College, explains it: “Our weekly check-in meetings, garden work parties, and shared meals developed in everyone the skill of open, honest conversation, which I have relied on my entire life and believe is really valuable in any situation.”

This, too, is revolutionary when you look closer. While most so-called typical families face food insecurity, strains on their time or energy, sickness, and any number of other challenges within the four walls of their own private homes, cohousing kids are raised in an environment where many of these things are treated as collective problems and possibilities for growth. As Dorothy Day says, “We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.”

In the cohousing community where I live, one of our members suffered a debilitating stroke in 2013. We faced the crisis as a community, turning one of the apartments on our grounds into an Airbnb and rotating responsibility for cleaning it. The additional funds helped pay for physical therapy and other medical bills. We already shared meals twice a week, but we quickly devised a plan for bringing additional meals to our friends’ home. This kind of cooperation isn’t seen as “above and beyond” in a cohousing community; it’s seen as a fact of communal life, a cycle through which we each experience being both the recipient and the provider.

Kids raised in the midst of that cycle are taught that needing others isn't a weakness, but an inevitability, and that serving others isn't a resume builder, but an organic part of life among people you care about, regardless of whether you share genetic material. Helen Thomson, who grew up in [Heartwood Cohousing](#) near Durango, Colorado, from the age of 5 until she left for the University of Montana, explains: "I think that all of us who grew up in Heartwood are much better at communicating and working together than many other kids our age."

Friendshuh is still at Carleton College, but she's interested in pursuing a career in counseling. She's done multiple internships in the field. The first was with a therapist in private practice—what she assumed was the "gold standard" of her future profession. But after a short time she realized that the whole set-up felt isolating to her; growing up in community had conditioned her to expect more interaction and collaboration from a profession. The next internship she pursued was on a ranch with many different clinicians, all of whom talked through their cases together, and even integrated equine therapy. "I learned that I can still be a therapist without shutting myself off from my professional peers and that collaborative therapy work is much more my style," Friendshuh says.

While Thomson attests to learning the skills of interdependence at Heartwood, she also feels like she was gifted a more independent childhood than most. "We all grew up with a sense of adventure," she explains. "When we were young, we would have a 'check-in'—just a friend's parent that would check on us—rather than a babysitter. We would run around the neighborhood and take care of ourselves, with an adult there only if we needed them."

Almost all of the kids who grew up in Heartwood have gone on to take big leaps—studying abroad, going away for school, carving unconventional paths in the "real world" despite economic constraints.

In an era when many lament the death of "[free-range parenting](#)," it turns out that the structure of cohousing allows for an unusual amount of personal agency for young people. So much research shows that informal play is where kids learn how to be creative and identify, manage, and negotiate their own and others' emotions, and yet, many kids who grow up in traditional settings are shuttled from activity to activity under the constant and close surveillance of adults. Cohousing kids often have freedom to roam between houses and in the shared outdoor spaces, even as little kids. "We would play in the woods and build tree forts," Thomson says, "play bike games and massive games of freeze tag."

Many of the kids who grew up in cohousing attest to having a different way of moving through the world than most people. They're curious about humanity and what each person brings to the table. "It means so much to me when my friends, as I get to know them, say things to me like, 'You're really good at getting people to open up and talk to you. Not in a pressuring way, but in a feeling-heard way,'" Durrett says. "That means the

world to me. It's the best compliment I can imagine. I care about the communities I am a part of and it's a defining factor of my life. It makes my life so rich."

Growing up in cohousing, of course, is not without its drawbacks. The proximity means less privacy. One young adult who grew up in cohousing summed it up in one word: "Gossip!"

Many cohousing communities are set up on dense plots, unlike more spacious suburban settings, so it's easy to overhear fallouts or spy a teenager bringing home a new crush. As Garlick explains, "There is always someone less than 100 feet away from you, and while that's usually an asset, sometimes it becomes overwhelming. It is inherently difficult to live with other people, and when you live with this many other people that is magnified. I remember feeling like it was difficult to find space when I needed it, or like someone was constantly listening in when my family was fighting (which we can be pretty loud about)."

For others, cohousing was a letdown because it was so homogeneous—an ongoing struggle for the cohousing movement. "The lack of diversity is disappointing," one former cohouser told me. And another said, "This model of cohousing is dependent on elitism and privilege."

And yet, for all its potential flaws, almost all of the young adults I interviewed said that, given the chance, they would raise their own kids in cohousing. Though still in their 20s, they talked about the lasting benefits of their unusual upbringing. They unanimously expressed genuine and deep gratitude.

Koenig, who is now 28 and a public radio reporter in Alaska, summed it up most beautifully. After sitting on porches and in kitchens and on living room couches for hours upon hours interviewing her neighbors, she realized that there was no template for adulthood. In her words, "I learned that there is no one right way to live; that loss and failure and doubt are part of the package; that love finds its way to you in surprising and humbling ways; and that 'adulthood' is a made-up thing that never actually arrives." She went on: "And as wise and valuable as all that was, I think the bigger takeaway from those conversations was just that they made me feel loved. Wisdom is a gift, and they were willing to sit with me and give it."

Courtney E. Martin is the author of *The New Better Off: Reinventing the American Dream* and *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists*. You can read more about her and sign up for her newsletter [here](#).